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AUTHOR Schuyler, Nancy Baenen; Ligon, Glynn
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ABSTRACT

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is now in its third year of study on the effects of a new retention policy adopted in 1981-82. Reviewing the results of the first two years led to the conclusion that traditional methods of studying retention might not be the most appropriate. These evaluations have primarily focused on the impact of the policy change on retention rates and retainee achievement, attitudes toward retention, and the success of various interventions in helping retainees. Because retention is an individual decision, the evaluation should focus on the success of individual students--not on group averages. This year's evaluation will study the success of a sample of individual retainees, based on teachers' opinions, parents' opinions, and achievement test scores. In addition, the achievement of students in schools with high and low retention rates will be compared. (BW)

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Do We Fail Those We Fail?

Nancy Baenen Schuyler
Glynn Ligon

Office of Research and Evaluation
Austin Independent School District
6100 Guadalupe
Austin, Texas 78752

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Do We Fail Those We Fail?

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is now in its third year of study on the effects of a new retention policy adopted in 1981-82. Reviewing the results of the first two years led to the conclusion that traditional methods of studying retention might not be the most appropriate. Because retention is an individual decision, the evaluation must focus on the success of individual students--not on group averages.

Objectives

The Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) has been studying the effects of a new AISD elementary retention policy since 1981-82. The experience of the first two years led to changes in this year's evaluation. This paper will describe:

1. The nature of the study during the first two years and the relative impact of the results.
2. New directions taken this year after a review and discussion of previous evaluation results and impact.
3. Questions to consider in deciding which evaluation efforts will have the greatest payoff.

Anyone primarily concerned with the different approaches being employed this year may want to read the last section of this paper, The 1983-84 Study: New Directions, before the rest.

Perspectives

The trend nationwide has been away from social promotion and towards stricter standards and more retentions. AISD is no exception. A new retention policy at the elementary level was adopted in May of 1981 for implementation during the 1981-82 school year.

School officials asked the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) to study the effects of this policy change, on a limited basis, over a three-year period (with a special focus on achievement outcomes).

Data were collected for the following school years:

- 1979-80, when an old, general policy was in effect;
- 1980-81, when the new policy was adopted but not officially in effect;
- 1981-82, when the new policy was officially implemented;
- 1982-83 and 1983-84, when the new policy had been in effect one and two years.

The research literature reveals two primary types of studies on retainees' achievement--those utilizing comparison groups and those comparing retainees' growth rates over time. Retainees showed smaller achievement gains than similar students not retained in most studies utilizing comparison groups (Bocks, 1973; Jackson, 1975; Koons, 1977; Reiter, 1973; Walker, 1973). However, retainees' growth often increased between the year leading to retention and the retention year, (Jackson, 1975; Owen and Ranick, 1977). Most studies suffered from methodological problems. The three studies reviewed by Jackson (1975) experimentally assigned students to be retained or promoted. However, they were over 30 years old, studied achievement over a maximum of six months, and found mixed results. Studies of effects on attitude towards school or self-concept present mixed results (Bocks, 1977; Finlayson, 1975; Reiter, 1973; Walter, 1973). A recent review by Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus (1983) concurred with earlier reported trends, and indicated that, in South Carolina at least, minority and low-income students were retained more often than other students.

Past Research:

Methods, Data Sources, Results

AISD's retention evaluation has focused primarily on:

- The impact of the policy change on retention rates and retainee achievement,
- Attitudes towards retention, and
- The success of various interventions in helping retainees.

Descriptive information on retainees, achievement analyses, and survey and interview data (from teachers, administrators, and parents) have all been employed in the evaluation. Figure 1 summarizes the questions addressed, methods of investigation, and the impact of each set of results.

In a broader sense, the fact that descriptive statistics were calculated and publicized made the Superintendent and instructional staff aware of the large increase in the number of retentions after the publication of the new policy. At the August 1982 Administrator Workshop, the Superintendent specifically mentioned his hope that the number of retentions could decrease in 1982-83 as a result of improved instruction--they did decrease. Whether the cause was the Superintendent's speech, better instruction, or both, of course, can never be proven.

The other findings related to implementation which seemed to have had an impact related to inservice and intervention efforts. The School Board was very interested in hearing that only 40% of the teachers felt adequately prepared to help retainees. Unfortunately, the fact that staff development tapes available were not used very often received little attention.

Summer school was a major effort designed to help retainees. Since the Board of Trustees mandated the program, there was no question of whether the program would occur or not. However, ORE did play an active part in the planning efforts, and influenced some decisions on the design of the program based on past research results. In terms of the evaluation results, staff was very interested in results that pointed specifically to areas they could improve next time around. The fact that retainees who attended summer school scored no higher on the ITBS in reading and math than those who did not by the next spring had less impact--a third summer school is planned for next summer.

In terms of achievement results, the Assistant Superintendent and Directors of Elementary Education were primarily concerned that retention be viewed as a positive step--as another chance for students to catch up to their peers and to function in the middle of their instructional group instead of the bottom. Findings of primary concern were:

- Small math gains of .65 during the year retained;
- Changing patterns of growth in reading and math before, during, and after retention;
- Students not catching up to grade level, especially at the upper grade levels;
- Nonretained low achievers gaining more in one, two, and three years than the retainees.

QUESTION	METHODS	RESULTS AND IMPACT
POLICY IMPLEMENTATION		
1. What were the rates of retention during 1979-80, 1980-81, 1981-82, 1982-83, 1983-84? by enrollment, grade, ethnicity, sex, desegregation reassignment status, limited English proficiency status, Title I/ Chapter 1 service?	Lists obtained from schools each spring, descriptive information added from District files, demographic statistics run by enrollment and overall.	Retention rates increased with publication and implementation of new policy and then decreased. Increased awareness of changes in rates may have influenced decrease.
2. How many students recommended for retention in the spring were actually retained in the fall? How many students not recommended for retention in the spring were retained in the fall?	Check of Student Master File for those not retained; survey of schools for "new" retainees in fall.	Increased awareness that all those listed in spring are not really retained, and that some not listed in spring are retained in the fall (which is allowed but not recommended in new policy). Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education requested list of promoted students this year.
3. What criteria are used by principals and teachers in making retention decisions?	Teacher and administrator surveys. Case study interviews.	Found school personnel were following criteria in policy fairly closely but still were retaining students at different rates across schools. Minimal impact.
4. What are the rates of retention by achievement status?	Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) Reading Total scores for 1979-80, 1980-81, 1981-82 by decile.	Found most of those retained were low achievers but only a small portion (about 15%) of low achievers were retained. A few average achievers were also retained. Elementary Education asked that schools be provided with scores of potential retainees with special note on those with average or above scores to check status.

Figure 1. AISD RETENTION EVALUATION: 1981-82, 1982-83. Questions addressed, methods, results, and impact. (Page 3 of 4)

QUESTION	METHODS	RESULTS AND IMPACT
5. How successful were interventions designed to help retainees?	Summer school evaluation: Mastery tests, ITBS scores, teacher ratings, teacher and administrator surveys, observations. Records and ratings of in-service efforts. Interviews with coordinators about pilot efforts with first-grade teachers, test scores for teachers' students.	Summer school: Students showed good mastery of skills on a short-term basis but scored similarly to retainees not in summer school by the next spring. Review of past research with planners and involvement in planning had some impact on nature of program. Negative long-term results did not prevent additional summer schools. Eligibility criteria were changed somewhat based on results. Inservice: Use was limited, although sessions were seen as having some value. Teachers' work with coordinators for six months focused attention on retainees but did not appear to impact achievement. Only 40% of the teachers felt adequately prepared to help retainees. Staff was surprised at low use and at adequacy of preparation ratings, but little occurred to increase use. One new pilot intervention was started based on materials supplied to instruction by ORE on a program in another district.

QUESTION	METHODS	RESULTS AND IMPACT
IMPACT OF RETENTION ON ACHIEVEMENT		
1. How much do retainees gain in reading and math during the year retained?	ITBS mean G.E. gains from spring before retention to spring at end of retention year.	Retainees gain about .85 of a year in reading and .65 of a year in math during the year repeated. Viewed as decent growth in reading and less than desired in math. Some ideas on how to help were circulated by newsletter.
2. What progress did retained students make in one year in 1982-83 compared to 1981-82 compared to 1980-81?	Comparison of percent gaining .8 GE years or more and of mean GE gains across years.	The percentage gaining .8 of a GE year or more has increased slightly. A very slight upward trend in mean gains is evident at most grade levels. Viewed as positive sign of impact of increased emphasis on helping retainees and policy in general.
3. How did the scores of retainees compare to District averages?	Comparison of AISD overall and retainee mean GE scores.	Retainees generally do not "catch up" to grade level after retention but come closer at the primary than the intermediate grades. Little impact on some; used as evidence that students do come close to average at primary grades by others.
4. Do the patterns of growth change before, during, and after retention?	ITBS gains in reading and math for 1981-82 retainees between 1980 and 1981, 1981 and 1982, 1982 and 1983.	In reading, retainees gain more in year repeated than in year leading to retention, but gains drop when promoted. In math, gains drop between year leading to retention and retention year, and increase once students are promoted. Results viewed as interesting; ideas on how to help were sent to teachers in newsletter; unknown impact.

Figure 1. (Page 3 of 4)

QUESTION	METHODS	RESULTS AND IMPACT
5. What are the achievement levels of retained students versus a group of nonretained students with similar characteristics after one year, two years, three years?	Regression analyses of ITBS Reading and Math Total scores for retainees and matched groups of 1979-80, 1980-81, 1981-82 retainees.	Retainees almost always gained significantly less in math and usually gained less in reading by grade. Reaction was criticism of ability to ever have a "matched" group for retainees, dismissal of results by some, concern about results by others. Increased more thoughtful consideration of goals of retention and more efforts to help schools deal with retainees. May also have influenced lower retention rate in 1982-83.
6. Did one-year gains of retainees vary by ethnicity? by LEP status?	Mean grade equivalent gains for groups compared.	Anglo retainees gain slightly more in reading at four of six grades. No systematic differences were found by ethnicity in math. LEP retainees gain one month less in reading but one month more in math. Little noticeable impact.
7. What methods are most effective in meeting the needs of retainees?	Selected successful and unsuccessful retainees based on ITBS gain distributions in reading; interviewed teachers and checked records of students.	Identifying the source of students' problems and developing and implementing a systematic plan to address them seemed essential. No specific methods emerged as most successful. Results sent in newsletter to teachers and staff. Some minimal impact we think.
8. Can characteristics of students who benefit from retention be identified?	Discriminant analysis on variety of demographic variables.	No consistent pattern emerged of characteristics predicting success. Good in sense no discrimination was evident. Bad in that schools and staff really wanted some idea of who it is best to retain. Suggested social, emotional factors might be important. Led ORE to think about alternate ways to investigate question.

Figure 1. (Page 4 of 4)

The fact that, on the average, retainees did not catch up to District averages was a milder concern at the primary than the intermediate levels. At the primary grades, students came close enough so that most would be able to function in at least a middle reading and/or math group, which was their goal. At the intermediate level, students start out so far below grade level that the fact they do not catch up was not too surprising.

Results comparing retainees with similar nonretainees were the cause of concern for more than one reason. Central instructional staff basically viewed the comparison as unfair; the fact that one group of students was retained and the other promoted implied that there was indeed a difference in the two groups. While ORE did not deny that there might be some social or attitudinal differences between the groups that could not be controlled for, the analyses were still viewed as the best estimate available of how retainees would have done had they been promoted. In addition, the wide variation in the number of students retained in each school (even in schools serving similar populations) made it quite likely that a student might be retained in one school and promoted in another.

The Board of Trustees viewed the question of whether these students were better off promoted or retained as a very important one, and asked three questions about the implications of the matched-group results at the presentation made to them. This was in spite of the fact that the results were only mentioned along with all the other descriptive and achievement results in a five-minute presentation.

In spite of the controversy over the validity of the comparisons, the matched-group results seemed to cause everyone to consider seriously the questions of whom to retain and what to expect from retention. The discriminant analyses, had they shown definitive results, might have been well used in deciding whom to retain for this reason.

ORE tried a new approach to impact teachers with retention results this year. A newsletter was issued jointly by ORE and Instruction which listed several of the major findings of concern and instructional ways to address them. The impact is actually unknown except for the few positive comments that have been received, but it seems this approach has a greater possibility for success than sending out retention findings alone. Unfortunately, no one is really sure what might best help retainees, so suggestions were more general than might be desired.

A pilot effort to prevent retention was also begun at least partially due to ORE efforts. Findings cast doubts about whether retention was the best alternative for most very low achievers. Materials on a prevention program in another District forwarded from ORE to Instruction also stimulated thinking about other options. The pilot, operating in two schools this year, identified potential first-grade retainees in the fall and provided them with extra reading and math help thoughout the year.

Finally, it is important to note that the case studies done to see if any methods could be identified that benefitted retainees were well received even though only 12 were done and the conclusions were very general. Service and accountability functions are both important in this type of research. Instruction is much more likely to listen if you provide at least some findings they can use.

The 1983-84 Study:

New Directions

During the early fall of 1983-84, ORE reviewed the questions asked over the previous two years and considered which questions were really the most important. This was done to assure maximum benefit from the resources devoted to the evaluation during a year when less time could be devoted to the topic. The questions we decided to focus on are shown in Attachment 1. Basically, we chose questions on retention rates that provided baseline and accountability data as well as information which the instructional staff had requested. For example, Elementary Education instructional staff asked for a list of students recommended for retention in the spring but promoted in the fall, plus a printout showing the achievement scores of students considered potential retainees as of February 1984. The printout was also sent to the schools, and was designed to help them take a second look at students who actually showed fairly good achievement on the ITBS the previous spring.

In terms of the impact of retention on achievement, a different approach is being tried this year. Matched-group analyses were dropped, partly because we believed they had already had maximal impact, and partly because of their focus on the "average" retainee. Averages tend to hide the fact that some individual students benefitted from retention while others did not. *Since retention decisions must be made on an individual basis, it seemed the determination of success was best made on an individual basis as well.* This year, the success of a sample of individual retainees will be determined based on:

- Teachers' opinions
- Parents' opinions
- ITBS scores in reading and math.

This approach will allow success to be based on both subjective and objective information, and reveal similarities and differences in perceptions of success from different sources. Success statistics will be supplemented by charts showing just how much growth retainees make on the ITBS by score ranges and grades.

The other new activity this year is a check on the achievement of students in schools with high and low retention rates. These data may shed some light on whether it is better to retain a few or many students.

The only achievement data collection that will be repeated is the calculation of mean growth rates (to allow comparisons to previous years), and a check on growth patterns of 1982-83 retainees before, during, and after retention (since they were the first to be officially retained under the new policy).

It is important to note that we did not include questions on some very important topics, primarily because of limited resources or because we believed impact would be minimal. For example, we did not decide to measure students' attitude towards school or self-concept except as it impacted teacher and parent success ratings. This was due partially to limited resources, partially to the relative unreliability of measures in the area, and partially because these concepts seemed most important in relation to success ratings. There are always more questions available to address than can be dealt with adequately, and choices must be made.

In deciding what to study in relation to retention, it is crucial to determine what the goal of retention is in the school district.

Some district policies will clearly specify at least short-term goals (e.g., skills to be mastered before promotion). However, long-term benefits are seldom specified except perhaps in very general terms. Try to determine whether retention is expected to:

1. Make the child learn at a faster rate to ensure higher skill levels upon high school graduation;
2. Make the child more socially fit, with a better match in maturity to his/her peers' (especially at the early grades);
3. Make the child more academically fit, with a better match in achievement to peers'.

Is there some other goal?

This question is not always easy to resolve. In AISD, the goal of retention is not clearly specified in the policy. The first two years, the evaluation therefore tried to look at the policy's effectiveness from various perspectives. The matched group analyses assumed that unless retainees could gain at a faster rate than similar low achievers, retention was not worth an extra year in the same grade (see goal 1). Negative reactions to these analyses seemed to not only be due to the belief that the two groups may not be comparable, but to the feeling that this might be an unrealistic goal for retention. Instructional staff have now stated that they hope retention can at least enable the retainee to function in the middle of the class. In other words, retention is expected at least to help the child fit in better socially and academically with peers (goals 2 and 3). This year's evaluation is designed to collect information on whether retention has been successful with this as a goal.

It is important to point out that unless retainee's rate of growth can be increased (goal 1), the student's match with other students will fade as he/she progresses through the grades (goal 3). Thus, even if a student matches peers well at the end of the retention year, he must maintain an achievement growth rate of one grade equivalent year in order to keep up (rather than eight months or less as he/she had previously). Another example relates to goal 2. It is important to realize that retaining a student due to social immaturity is hard to reverse later. If a first grader is retained due to social immaturity but in later grades does not fit in because of a faster physical and social maturity rate, it is difficult if not impossible to resort to double promotion. Try to help instructional staff really consider the long-term as well as the short-term implications of retention.

Other questions important to consider in studying retention include:

1. Who is your audience? (Different audiences have very different needs.)

2. What does your audience want to know? Should you focus on service, accountability, or something else?

3. Can you answer the questions with the resources allotted? If not, how close can you come?

4. Within resources, which questions are most likely to yield results with an impact?

5. Once you have the results, how can you best communicate them to assure a maximal impact?

If each of these questions is carefully considered, the evaluation or research is more likely to be useful and well received by the audience(s).

Overall, we believe we have selected the questions that will have the most impact, both in terms of service and accountability, for AISD. We involved instructional staff more closely in evaluation planning this year, and they appear very comfortable with the evaluation plan.

Evaluation Outline:

Decision Question D1: What impact has the new elementary policy had on retention rates?

Date Needed: July 1984

Evaluation Questions	Information Sources
D1-1. How many students were recommended for retention at the end of the 1983-84 school year? How does this compare to previous years?	· School Reports (June)
D1-2. What are the characteristics of 1983-84 recommended retainees in terms of: • Grade • Ethnicity • Special education status • Limited-English-proficiency status • School?	· Student Master File (June)
D1-3. How many students were listed as potential retainees as of February 1983?	· School Reports (February)
D1-4. For the schools' information, what was the 1982-83 achievement of students considered potential retainees as of February 1984?	· Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) (February)
D1-5. How many students recommended for retention in spring 1982-83 were promoted or left AISD as of: • Fall 1983 • Spring 1984?	· Student Master File (October, March)
D1-6. Considering grade levels served, school enrollment, and low achievers served, which schools had high and low numbers of students repeating a grade in 1983-84?	· Student Master File (November) · ITBS (November) · Principal Interviews* (December)
D1-7. What prekindergarten and kindergarten programs did first-grade retainees participate in?	· Student Master File (December) · Project Files (December) · Parent Interviews (December)

*If resources permit

Decision Question D2: What impact has the new policy had on achievement?
Should the District policy be changed?

Date Needed: July 1984

Evaluation Questions		Information Sources
D2-1.	How many months' growth did those who repeated a grade in 1983-84 show in reading and math between spring 1983 and spring 1984? by grade?	· ITBS (April)
D2-2.	What were the one-year mean grade-equivalent gains in reading and math of those repeating 1983-84? How do these gains compare to those of previous retainees?	· ITBS (April)
D2-3.	How many retainees were successful?	· ITBS (April) · Parent Survey (March-April) · Teacher Survey (February) · Administrator Survey (February)
D2-4.	How did the growth patterns of those who repeated a grade in 1982-83 change before, during, and after retention in reading and math (based on mean GE gains)?	· ITBS (April)
D2-5.	Did the achievement growth of retainees in schools with high and low retention rates vary?	· ITBS (November)

Information Need		Information Source
I1.	What interventions have been tried with retainees?	· Administrator Survey (February)

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OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION, AISD,
6100 GUADALUPE, BOX 79, AUSTIN, TX. 78752